Videos appear to show captured Cuban nationals who were fighting alongside Russia in Ukraine

By Cristian Benavides

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In its push to hold captured territory in Ukraine, Russia has turned to countries like North Korea for added manpower. Now, it appears additional support is also coming from Cuban mercenaries.

Videos obtained by CBS News appear to show Cuban nationals captured by Ukraine on the front lines with Russia. Ukrainian officials estimate as many as 20,000 Cubans have been recruited by Russia to fight as mercenaries.

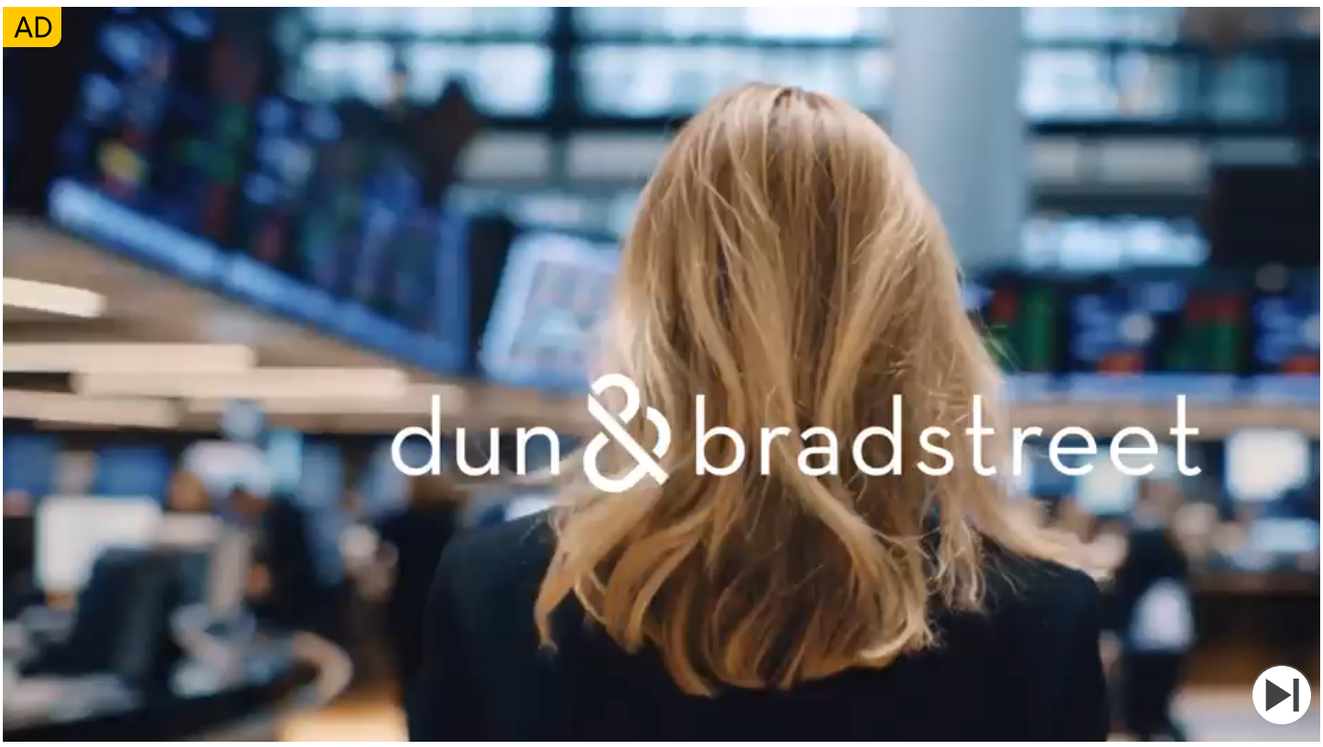
"Cubans are looking for any way to get out," Florida GOP Rep. Mario Diaz Balart said. "They're recruiting Cubans from around the island with these false promises."

Ukrainian officials, who shared copies of dozens of passports belonging to Cubans they believe to be mercenaries, say Cubans are being offered one-year contracts with the promise of a $2,000 monthly salary. The average monthly salary in Cuba is about 6,500 Cuban pesos, according to government data, which is equivalent to less than $20. The average age of the mercenaries is 35. Many of those recruited live in poverty and are in desperate need of money.

One family of a Cuban national who went to fight in Russia told CBS News their loved one has been missing since November, and they haven't received any money.

Orlando Gutierrez Boronat, a Cuban-American activist and a member of the Assembly of the Cuban Resistance, a human rights organization dedicated to a free Cuba, traveled to Ukraine last year and spoke to one of the Cuban nationals. Boronat said the prisoner he spoke to was told he would do construction, helping rebuild cities destroyed in the war.

"When he got to Russia, he found out he and dozens of other Cubans were being assigned roles in the front lines," Boronat said.

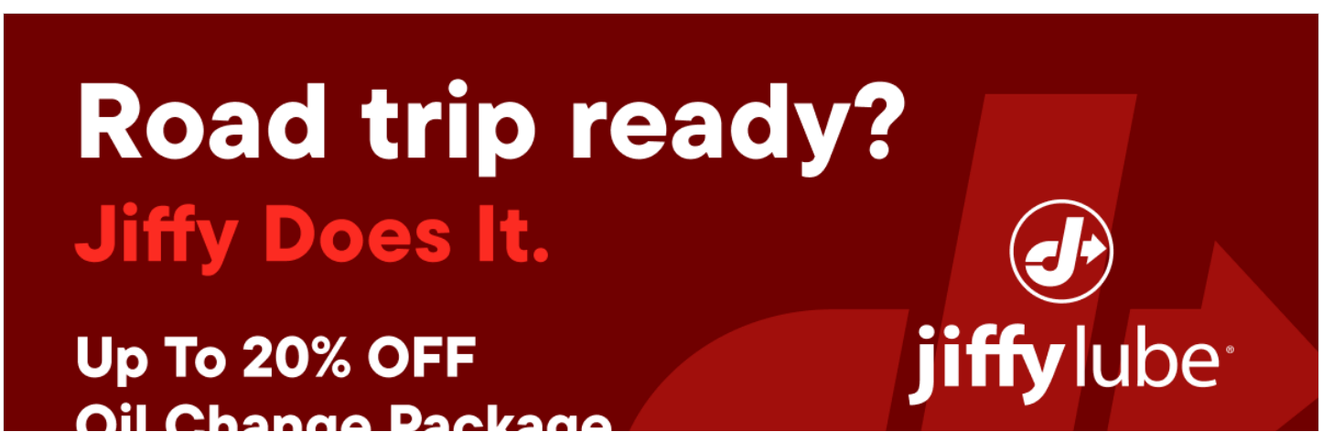


Officials in Ukraine have compiled a list of 39 Cubans who have been killed, but they believe the death toll to be much higher.

"Currently, we have three Cuban prisoners of war. Two of them have been captured in the last two months," Maryan Zablotskyy, a member of Ukraine's parliament, said.

"We think that, eventually, the number of Cuban troops will hit at least 25,000, becoming the No. 1 contingent of foreign troops in Russia," Zablotskyy said, which would overtake North Korea.

Diaz Balart said this "absolutely does not happen without the coordination and the approval and the support of the Cuban regime."



The Cuban government denied any involvement and said it has cracked down on trafficking rings recruiting Cuban nationals.